



Active Engagement

FEATURE ARTICLE

Frank and Joan: Finding New Life in Retirement

"In some ways, I felt a bit lost when it was over," says Frank, about his retirement from a 40-year teaching career. "I was happy and energetic, but I felt strange in those first few weeks as I thought about what to do with all the time I had to myself."

Frank's wife Joan sympathized with him. A former nurse, she had a similar feeling about retirement when it began for her 2 years before her husband. "We're both active people—always have been. But that didn't make it easy to adjust to the change. I know some people who seemed to sail into retirement, but for me it wasn't so easy. I kept myself busy, but I was also thinking, 'Now what should I *really* be doing?'"

Joan, who had spent her entire working life caring for people, admitted feeling some sadness in the earliest days of her retirement. "For years I'd been making a clear difference for people every day at work, so I think I felt a little depressed without so many people depending on me," she says. "Like me, when Frank retired, I could see him missing his students, and missing the confidence he got from teaching."

Now, a few years into their joint retirement, both chuckle when they look back at their transitions. Having found their "groove" as retired seniors, the two now boast a healthy outlook on balancing their lives with volunteer work, staying fit, and enjoying their time with each other and their family. "Our start was probably a bit rocky," admits Frank. "But these days we're just loving it."

Frank found joy as a little league coach in the initial months after his last school year ended. Having coached high school baseball earlier, he'd always meant to return to the sport. When a neighbor called to see if he could replace a coach who was moving away, Frank jumped at the chance. Since then, he's also become a coordinator for the league, and he serves as a volunteer coach and physical activity mentor at the local community center. "It keeps me active with kids all year round. I just love their energy."

For Frank, the question of what to do after retirement was answered by finding new opportunities to apply the teaching and coaching skills he had honed as a professional. "Yeah," laughs Joan, "but he learned that by watching me. That's the way it's always been!" Suddenly she and Frank are laughing together.

Joan explains that when she found herself sad about not being able to help people, "I needed to find a way to do just that!" And find it she did. Joan is now an integral part of her church's Caring Committee, which finds ways to assist church members and others in her community who need help. "We arrange for doctors' trips, help people get the groceries or supplies they need, and sometimes just spend time with people who are in a tough spot. It makes me feel right at home with myself, like I used to feel. Only I have a lot more time with Frank these days."

"It's not always easy—life will always have its ups and downs," Frank says as he reflects on his post-teaching life. "We have to be careful about our health and make sure we don't overdo it. We have to be even more careful with our money. But being active helps others and makes us happy. And isn't that what it's all about?"

The Benefits of Active Engagement

Like Frank and Joan, many new retirees suddenly have a lot of free time on their hands. Many find themselves asking, "What do I do now?" As the age for retirement nears for millions of baby boomers, this question is becoming increasingly important.

Older Americans who maintain an active schedule of engagement help keep themselves mentally and physically fit. Those who start new careers, such as opening a business or working part-time, can also help themselves financially. Volunteering with local organizations and pursuing other group activities can help seniors keep and expand their social connections. Seniors should take advantage of their increased free time or new starting-off point by trying something that they have always wanted to do, by taking a skill they already have in a new direction, or by becoming more actively involved in a community activity.

Working Seniors

Many opportunities await seniors who have the time to be productive, and many seniors choose to keep working. In addition to the personal rewards that employment can bring, older workers contribute substantially to the nation's economy. The retirement contribution from baby boomers will become increasingly important to our national productivity because the size of that generation was not matched by the generations that followed.

After retirement, many seniors start their own businesses to use the same skills they developed while working for their employers. Others look for work in areas that interested them when they did not have the time. Still others go back to school to acquire the skills for new jobs. Regardless of the direction they take, working seniors can contribute greatly to the economy while staying actively engaged in life through work.

Volunteerism

Many studies have documented correlations between volunteering and positive aging among older adults. While volunteering makes you feel good, it can also improve your health because it helps you make new contacts, develop new friendships, and feel connected to the greater community. Volunteerism helps communities, introduces seniors to new friends and acquaintances, and enriches life for everyone involved. Opportunities for community engagement include mentoring young people, working at soup kitchens, and maintaining parks and recreation areas. Some seniors look for opportunities to volunteer through their church or local government. Others pursue more formal opportunities such those offered by Senior Corps, a program of the USA Freedom Corps, or the Peace Corps.

Personal Development and Fitness

Another way to stay active is through personal development. Some older Americans choose to travel and see places they never had the time or resources to visit when they were younger. Others turn to school, taking courses at the local college or through community recreation centers in subjects that pique their interest. By learning new things and seeing new places, seniors can expand their horizons, stay sharp, and help to ensure their mental fitness for years to come.

Perhaps most important for a long and productive life, seniors have the opportunity to devote more care and time to their diets and exercise programs. Paying attention to how much and what they eat, and going for a walk every day is a good way to start. Beyond this, seniors can join gyms, health clubs, or take exercise classes through their local recreation centers. They can also get up-to-date information on healthy nutrition, and hone their culinary skills by taking cooking classes.

Keep Moving To Keep Moving

Regardless of which activities they choose to pursue, seniors need to stay active and involved in their own lives and in their communities, to improve the quality of both. With many golden years to look forward to, the hardest part might just be choosing what to do *first*.

As the Nation celebrates Older Americans Month in May, you can learn more about active engagement and other topics by visiting www.aoa.gov. The theme of Older Americans Month—"Celebrate Long-Term Living!"—highlights the goal of organizations throughout the Aging Network to help older Americans stay healthy and active longer. For information about local resources, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116, or visit www.eldercare.gov.

